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Jim Crow North: The Struggle for Equal Rights in Antebellum New England

Gordon S. Barker

Bishop's University, Quebec, gbarker@ubishops.ca

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Review

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Archer, Richard. *Jim Crow North: The Struggle for Equal Rights in Antebellum New England*. Oxford University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780190676643

In *Jim Crow North: The Struggle for Equal Rights in Antebellum New England*, Richard Archer explores the African-American quest for liberty and equality from the early 1700s, a period when slave codes in the Northeast mirrored those put in place in the Chesapeake, through to the outbreak of the American Civil War. Using an array of primary sources, including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers, government legislation, court records, census data, and personal correspondence, he crafts a gripping story of courageous black New Englanders challenging discrimination. Describing institutionalized segregation in such public spaces as churches, schools, workplaces, stage coaches, trains, and steamships, as well as statutes prohibiting inter-racial marriage, he reveals the resistance of several generations of New England blacks fighting oppression on a landscape that a pantheon of Revolutionary heroes, including their own Crispus Attucks, had consecrated in the name of liberty and equality. Archer also adeptly draws on relevant secondary scholarship, especially to explore and contextualize the personal stories of blacks—some famous but others little-known. He argues that regardless of where they settled in cities, towns, ports, and villages, or on farms, African Americans, with very few exceptions, experienced a harsh, oppressive “world restricted by racism” (39).

Focusing on race relations in Rhode Island, Eastern Connecticut, and Boston, Archer contends that racism became increasingly virulent as the numbers of people of color grew. But highlighting the scarcity of blacks in places like Lowell, Massachusetts, he also suggests that some mill towns had “few black residents by design” (36). He points out the horrible irony that while white New Englanders celebrated the disappearance of slavery, they allowed fierce prejudice to become entrenched in its place and such racism underpinned the Jim Crowism that blanketed the northern Free states through the mid-nineteenth century. In short, the antislavery

sentiments of white New Englanders did not translate into the advocacy of equal rights for the emancipated. Archer's meticulous analysis of the region's major ports, as well as some towns situated along its largest navigable rivers, underscores the prevalence of caste in antebellum New England. He convincingly demonstrates that the Narragansett-Eastern Connecticut region "fit the description" of the slave societies that emerged in the Chesapeake; he stresses that in the eighteenth century slaves represented more than a third of the population of this area adjacent to Narragansett Bay (24).

It is Archer's excellent storytelling, coupled with his contextualization of events, which enriches *Jim Crow North* and makes it an especially worthwhile read for historians and general interest readers of African American history. Detailing the challenges confronted by such legendary blacks as Hosea Easton, David Walker, Maria W. Stewart, John Russworm, George Latimer, Alexander Crummell, Lewis Hayden, Charles Lenox Remond, Frederick Douglass, William C. Nell, Charlotte Forten, and others, Archer recounts tales of unrelenting resistance against injustices in virtually all walks of life. He seamlessly weaves such remarkable individuals onto the landscape they challenged and sought to change, and he underscores their agency, courage, and even heroism. Without question, his portrayal of the African-American fight for access to education and school desegregation is one of the strengths of this work. He describes the failure of Simeon Jocelyn's black college in New Haven, the Prudence Crandall drama in Canterbury, Connecticut, the removal of the Noyes Academy in Canaan, New Hampshire, Eunice Ross's battle to attend Nantucket High School, Sarah Roberts' unsuccessful attempt to enroll in the Otis School in Boston, and William Pindall's demand that his five-year-old son Edward be allowed to register at a nearby Boston white school. Archer explains court cases related to these struggles, stressing as well the divisions these battles caused within both the white and black communities. His discussion of *Sarah C. Roberts v. City of Boston*, one of William C. Nell's and Charles Sumner's most disappointing setbacks, is particularly noteworthy. In examining this hard fight for school desegregation and Black Bostonians' eventual victory in the mid-1850s, Archer emphasizes the strident racism that made headlines in contemporary newspapers and he notes that it mirrored the race prejudice evident during suffrage debates associated with giving black males the right to vote. He reminds us that African-American men in Connecticut only received the franchise after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1870.

Archer's discussion of prohibitions on inter-racial sex and marriage in New England merits special attention. Tracing the origins of such legislation to the colonial era, he focuses on the Massachusetts legislature's "Act for the Better Preventing of a Spurious and Mixt Issue" (26). He reveals how the race prejudice that underpinned this colonial law resonated through the antebellum period. His documentation of the battle to repeal legislation on inter-racial relationships supports his view that "mixed marriages exemplified a breakdown in the caste system" that white racists sought to maintain (165). His appendices dealing with mixed marriages provide a lens into how the racial status quo was at times challenged. His annexes must, however, be used with caution as a result of census-taking issues and various assumptions used in the construction of tables

Archer's *Jim Crow North* represents a solid contribution to the historical literature, even if some recent scholarship on the impact of fugitive slave crises and antislavery black militancy in the late antebellum years is lacking. Although the work is at times nuanced, its easy-to-read prose makes it ideal for assigning to undergraduate students. Finally, Richard Archer certainly identifies areas requiring further study, notably issues related to gender discrimination and the experiences of families headed by mixed-race couples.

Gordon S. Barker is associate professor of history at Bishop's University in Quebec, Canada. He is the author of The Imperfect Revolution: Anthony Burns and the Landscape of Race in Antebellum America and Fugitive Slaves and the Unfinished American Revolution, Eight Cases, 1848-1856, as well as several articles and reviews published in leading scholarly journals.